



Wellington's Hidden Heroes: The Dutch and the Belgians at Waterloo

by Veronica Baker-Smith.

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This revisionist history of the Battle of Waterloo portrays the Dutch and Belgian soldiers of the Prince of Orange as essential to the victory of the Duke of Wellington. They also ensured the survival of his army after Napoleon's rush north during the hundred days of his second reign over France. The book goes well beyond tactics and strategy to sketch the political history of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands from its origin in 1814. Readers will learn much, too, about the logistical constraints Dutch and Belgian soldiers faced during the Waterloo campaign. Such emphasis on the Dutch perspective is rare in English-language historiography. Most accounts of Dutch heroism at Quatre Bras and Waterloo—chiefly written in Dutch—have not previously been examined in detail by military historians of the battle. The author of *Wellington's Hidden Heroes*, historian Veronica Baker-Smith,¹ has spent time in the Netherlands and is fully conversant with the Dutch archival material relevant to Waterloo.

The book is organized chronologically, starting with a discussion of the foundation of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the creation of its army out of troops from the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the German possessions of the house of Orange-Nassau. The author then turns to the state of the Armée du Nord and Wellington's management of the difficult process of coalition-building in a polyglot context (ignored by strictly Anglophone historians). Baker-Smith next describes Wellington's surprise in Brussels at the French advance and the strategies adopted by both the French and Anglo-Dutch forces, with attention to the commanders of the Dutch army, including the young, much maligned Prince of Orange. We read next of the brave and determined stand made by the Dutch-Belgian force at Quatre Bras to buy time for Wellington to concentrate his scattered army. Then comes a recounting of the preparations for and the actual Battle of Waterloo.

Baker-Smith deconstructs the pro-British myth of the battle, which grudgingly gave credit to the Germans but not the Dutch and Belgians. The Iron Duke himself elided Dutch and Belgian bravery and skill from his (never revised or corrected) post-battle report. The author closes with a look at the aftermath of the battle in the Netherlands and a thoughtful conclusion that shows the Duke of Wellington in an extraordinarily humane light despite her previous criticisms.

Baker-Smith underscores Wellington's failure to prepare adequately for Napoleon's invasion on the strategic level and to give due credit to the Dutch and Belgians under his command (a quarter of his total force). She astutely taps not only neglected Dutch sources, but a passage by Wellington showing his wit as well as his concern for the well-being of his men:

Unfortunately, the sum of one shilling and nine pence remains unaccounted for in one infantry battalion's petty cash, and there has been a hideous confusion as to numbers of raspberry jam issued to one cavalry regiment during a sandstorm in western Spain. This reprehensible carelessness may be related to

1. Her earlier publications include *A Life of Anne of Hanover, Princess Royal* (Leiden: Brill, 1995) and *Royal Discord: The Family of George II* (Twickenham, UK: Athena Pr, 2008).

the pressure of circumstances since we are at war with France, a fact which may come as a bit of a surprise to you gentlemen in Whitehall. This brings me to my present purpose, which is to request elucidation of my instructions from His Majesty's Government so that I may be understand why I am dragging an army over these barren plains. I construe that perforce it must be one of the alternative duties, as given below. I shall pursue one with the best of my ability but I cannot do both. 1. To train an army of uniformed British clerks in Spain for the benefit of accountants and copy-boys in London, or, perchance, 2. To see to it that the forces of Napoleon are driven out of Spain. (182-83)

The author commendably clarifies the critical role of Dutch soldiers at Waterloo:

it is now generally accepted that the narrow victory at Waterloo was made possible by the determined defense of that crossroad which gained Wellington the time to deploy his scattered army on the ridge of Mont Saint Jean. However, the fact that the hopelessly outnumbered defenders were, for a vital two-hour period, Netherlanders has been unacknowledged until very recently. Many men fought in both battles and even for them the defining nature of Waterloo tended to overwhelm the memories of Quatre Bras. (90)

The author is careful to give credit where it is due. She praises Wellington's skillful command of coalition armies, his appreciation of the Prince of Orange's value as a subordinate and ally, and his humane concern to protect his soldiers from the nitpicking accountants in London. She succeeds in capturing the perspective of both the Allied forces (British, Dutch, and Prussian) and the French. That is, she has not simply produced a hatchet job on the Duke of Wellington, something too common in revisionist histories in general.

Baker-Smith argues persuasively that British authors, from Wellington onward, have celebrated British soldiers at Waterloo, with a nod to the Prussians at the end of the battle when its outcome hung in the balance, while glossing over the contribution of the Dutch and Belgians under the Prince of Orange. She exposes this bias by a careful scrutiny of the pertinent primary documents in Dutch archives and the Duke of Wellington's own post-battle report, as well the voluminous secondary literature. In so doing, she has greatly aided future historians of the battle.

Not only general readers but specialists in the subject will find much to appreciate in *Wellington's Hidden Heroes*, with its salutary stress on the unsung courage of Dutch and Belgian soldiers who disobeyed Wellington's orders at both Quatre Bras and Waterloo in order to save his position against heavy French assault.